Southeast Asia is one of the least researched areas of the Pleistocene Old World and current understandings of hunter-gatherer technological adaptations, economic organization and mobility patterns remain remarkably poor. In part, this situation reflects a relative scarcity of well-documented and well-dated Palaeolithic sites. An even greater obstacle to the study of behavioural adaptations in the region, however, has been the characterization of Southeast Asian lithic technology as crude and unchanging, and of little interpretive value. This view has been prevalent in the literature since the inception in the 1940s of the ‘Movius Line’. The Movius line effectively divides the Palaeolithic Old World into two separate Western and Eastern technological zones and is based on the presence of handaxes and prepared core technologies in the West and their general absence in Eastern Asia (Movius 1948). A common explanation for the seemingly crude and static nature of stone tools in Southeast Asia is that there was a greater reliance on bamboo and other organic materials in a tropical environment (Pope 1989), and/or that there was a general lack of high quality stone across large areas of the region which is thought to have constrained the development of more complex lithic technologies (Mellars 2006).

However, despite widespread support of these models and a general acceptance of the Movius Line more generally (Keates 2002; Schick 1994), the credibility of this technological division is increasingly being called into question (Brumm 2007; Pawlik 2004; Yi & Clark 1983). It has been noted, for example, that there is little evidence to support widespread bamboo tool use, especially since large tracts of Pleistocene Southeast Asia consisted of arid savannah rather than tropical rainforest environments (Brumm 2007; Hutterer 1985; Raddatz 2006). Nevertheless, a preoccupation with the differences in technologies east and west of this boundary has distracted from research investigating technological variability in Southeast Asia from its own unique regional perspective (Brumm 2007), a sentiment which has been expressed for other regions in eastern Asia (Chen & Wang 2004; Yi & Clark 1983). An
especially important criticism is that this generalized view of Southeast Asian lithic technologies has served to compress a wide range of existing inter-site and regional technological variability in the archaeological record (Brumm 2007; Raddatz 2006). The causes and behavioural significance of this variability have therefore only recently begun to be explored (e.g. Moore & Brumm 2007).

Figure 1: Location of the sites of Bukit Bunuh and Kota Tampan, Malaysia

In particular, my PhD research is investigating patterns of hunter-gatherer land-use and economic organization primarily from the analysis of lithic assemblages from a number of cave and open sites in Malaysia. My receipt of the John Wymer bursary contributed towards my participation in excavations at one of these sites, Bukit Bunuh (Figures 1–4), this past spring, which was followed by a short preliminary study of the lithic assemblage from the nearby site of Kota Tampan (Figure 1). These open sites have been OSL dated to c. 40kya (Roberts et al. 2005) and c. 70kya (Hamid 2007), respectively, and both have been interpreted as in situ lithic manufacturing workshops located on the shores of a fluctuating palaeo-lake (Mokhtar 2006, 2007). Previous analyses of the site assemblages have focused on typological classification and my study marks the first detailed technological analysis of the lithic assemblages. Specifically, my ongoing work is examining the reduction sequences and stages represented at each of these sites, the extent to which the availability and use of different types of raw materials has affected technological organization and inter-site technological variability, and the intensity of reduction and degree of curatorial behaviour represented in the assemblages. Although no organic materials have been preserved, a high density of artefacts including cores, anvils and hammerstones, and high frequencies of utilized flakes, suggests that Kota Tampan may have functioned as a long-term residential site as well as a stone tool manufacturing location as has been previously reported. While a comprehensive picture of Late Pleistocene settlement systems in Southeast Asia has yet to be determined, evidence
from many cave sites seems to indicate only temporary, intermittent occupations. Anderson (2005) has suggested that this could mean that caves were not the primary locations for settlement during this period; open-air sites, such as Kota Tampan or Bukit Bunuh, may prove to be better examples.

Figure 2: The site of Bukit Bunuh, Lenggong Valley of Perak, Malaysia

Bibliography


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*Figure 3: Excavations at Bukit Bunuh, Malaysia*
Figure 4: Excavations at Bukit Bunuh, Malaysia

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The recipient of the Wymer Bursary, Elizabeth Raddatz, is a PhD student in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. Her work on these sites is being conducted in collaboration with Prof. Mokhtar Saidin, Director of the Centre for Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia.